DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 146 622 CS 203 754

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TITLE And the Twain Shall Meet: The Aged in Children's Literature.
PUB DATE 77
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (28th, Kansas City, Missouri, March 31-April 2, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Change Strategies; *Changing Attitudes; *Characterization; Childhood Attitudes; *Childrens Books; *Childrens Literature; Elementary Education; *Older Adults; *Stereotypes; Youth

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the ways in which old age is characterized in children's literature. Two studies and several specific examples indicate that children are given a limited, stereotyped conception of old age in the books that they read. It is concluded that a need exists for more children's books that present old age in a positive manner, that describe aging in its various dimensions, and that show young people that youth and old age are related aspects of the human condition. (RL)

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And the Twain Shall Meet: The Aged in Children's Literature

Hazel S. Taylor

Literature which heightens a child's awareness to the concept of aging must present that concept in a sensitive manner. It should provide children with some ability to see that old age is a part of life's aggregate experience and that there should be concern about the quality of life for the elderly.

In a youth-oriented society such as we live in, it becomes extremely difficult for young people to realize that they too shall grow old and that "eventually the twain shall meet". For them the concept of aging is often only a vague notion of some escapable condition. In the United States contact with older persons, especially outside of the immediate family, is limited. Yet approximately one-fourth of the population is over sixty and projections are that in the next twenty-five years one-third of the total population will exceed that age.[1]

Therefore, children's vicarious experiences, such as those provided through literature, must present old age positively. Ageist attitudes or stereotypic portrayals should have no place in literature which intends to help children to understand and accept older people. For it is through abstract symbolic experiences that many concepts are learned or reinforced.[2]

Coping with human problems such as birth, pain, aging and loneliness are experiences which one cannot escape, and literature can be a vehicle for helping children to look at aging and to question and understand its meaning. Literature may intensify experiences and enrich one's life by making the reader aware of issues of the times and of each other. Thus in choosing literature for children, perhaps we need to keep in mind the words of the Roman poet, Torrance: "I am a man, nothing human is alien

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or different to me." There are varying stages of human life and development, but each one merely precedes or follows the other.

Myra P. and David M. Sadker,[3] authors of a current Children's Literature text, have examined ways in which children's books present the concept of aging. They analyzed folk tales, picture books and books for children in the upper and middle grades. In folk tales they found the elderly portrayed as: (1) discontent because they are childless as in "One Inch Fellow"[4] which is a variant of Tom Thumb and "Momotaro or the Story of the Son of a Peach";[5] (2) wise counselors such as the one found in the Caldecott Medal book, The Fool of the World and the Flying Ship;[6] (3) proficient and clever as exemplified in "The Bremen Town Musicians"[7] and The Wave;[8] (4) foolish and incapable, as described in "The Old Woman and the Tramp",[9] "The Old Woman and the Fish",[10] and "The Old Woman and Her Pig";[11] and (5) as evil crones, hags, and witches as found in "Hansel and Gretel".[12] The Sadkers summarized, however, that even though there is variety in the portrayals, the most powerful role portrayed by the elderly is that of crone or hag and these roles seem to have the greatest influence on the imagination of young readers.[13]

In the Sadkers' analysis of picture books, a portrayal of the aged appears to be somewhat more positive, with the most common themes emphasizing a warm bond between the old and the young. Some examples are Grandfather and I[14] and Grandmother and I[15] by Helen Buckley and Charlotte Zolotow's William's Doll.[16] Sometimes this bond is interrupted by illness or death, and the association of old age with death is felt to be one of the reasons why children view both concepts negatively. The intervention of death in a relationship is seen in Zolotow's My Grandson, Lew[17] which details a

young child's pleasant memories of a dead grandfather and Joan Lexau's Benjie On His Own[18] which describes a child's feelings when his grandmother becomes ill. In other books such as Elsa Beskow's Pelle's New Suit,[19] the Sadkers found that wisdom and competence accompany old age.[20] In A Story, A Story by Gail Halley, Ananse, the old Spider Man, is depicted as extremely generous and clever. In this delightful tale, Ananse is able to satisfy the Sky God, and thus bring stories to the earth.[21] But, for the most part, character portrayals of the aged in picture books are often superficial and one dimensional. Generally, older people are not presented as active, aggressive characters.

Exceptions however, are the "Tim" series by Edward Ardizzone, in which the older characters are portrayed in various dimensions. They operate lighthouses, run open boats, tell tales, wrestle robbers and even behave badly.[22] Their roles point up the diversity that is as common to that age as to any other. Masha Rudman[23] came to a conclusion similar to that of the Sadkers. She too found the presentation in picture books to be stereotypical and generalized. Few, if any characterizations of older people are as varied as those found in other age groups.

In many books for middle and upper grade children, the elderly are often shown to be grotesque and cantankerous. Others, however, are positive forthright statements realistically describing situations experienced by older people in contemporary society.

A choice example in the former category is Charlie and the Chocolate Factory,[24] where the aged are relegated to a miserable fate. The sequel, Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator,[25] treats the elderly in no more kindly manner with phrases such as "miserable old mackerel", and "balmy old bat" used in conversation between elderly people.

In the latter classification would be Norma Mazer's A Figure of Speech[26] which explores the issues of old age along with many of its ramifications. Here, it is a thirteen year old girl, Jenny, who is the only member of the family to respond to her grandpa as a human being and not just an old man to be tolerated or ignored. According to Rudman, A Figure of Speech does not mince words and raises issues about old age, suicide, and death that have no easy answers. The questions of morality and responsibility are important ones for adults as well as for children to consider.[27] In Changes,[28] by Gil Rabin, the central character, Chris, is forced to cope with varying emotional adjustments as he comes to terms with seeing his grandfather placed in a nursing home. The Secret Life of T. K. Dearing[29] and Land's End,[30] describe the love and understanding accorded an old man by his family.

The image of the elderly as wise and erudite is the theme in some books for middle grades. An illustration in point is The White Archer[31] by James Houston in which the hero is able to learn physical skill and become emotionally secure as a result of his association with two old people. Other books embodying the same idea are Calico Bush[32] by Rachel Field, and The Unmaking of Rabbit[33] by Constance Green.

Research conducted by Edward Ansello, Associate Director of the Center on Aging at the University of Maryland, found that less than 22 per cent of the children had any exposure to an older person other than in the family unit. Furthermore, most of them did not want a close relationship with an older person and characterized them as "sick, tired, and ugly".[34] This negative attitude highlights the need for more positive vicarious experiences which books can provide.

Ansello and Joyce Letzler, a doctoral student, examined 549 Easy Readers and Juvenile Picture books in order to quantify types of behavior assigned to older people. They noted publication dates, presence of older characters, sex, race, relationship to the main character, occupational roles, illustrations, behaviors, physical and personality descriptions. A summary of their findings based on the format used is this. The presence of older characters is more prevalent in books published in the past nine years. Only 16.03 percent of the 549 books included older characters at all. While the 1970 census indicated a three to two ratio of women to men (at age 65), in the total population, 55 percent of the book characters were male as compared to 42 percent female. There were very few Blacks and Hispanics represented and virtually no Asian or Native Americans. Only a minute number, 3.64 percent of the total, had as a focal point an older person. Occupational roles were obscured for the majority of older characters, and the elderly were illustrated in only 816 of a total of 18,000 pictures. Behavioral patterns were mostly routine and unimaginative. From a checklist of 135 adjectives prepared for the study, only three were necessary to describe the physical characteristics. Leading descriptors of personality were "sad" and "poor" followed by "dear", "happy", and "pleased". Ansello and Letzler concluded that ageism does in fact pervade children's literature, and that the present focus needs redirection.[35]

In summary, there appears to be a need for more books which explain in a positive manner the concept of aging and its various dimensions. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of books like Kevin's Grandma by Barbara Williams.[36] The older woman pictured in this book is a bright and vital person who enjoys a variety of activities with her grandson. They practice yoga, drink root beer, eat pizza and engage in a myriad of activities not

usually found in society's stereotypes. However, if books are going to represent truly contemporary society, more older people must be pictured as active, vibrant, and contributing individuals.

> There is an old Hindu tale about a little boy who meets his father carrying a large wicker basket. The father explains to his son what he plans to do with the basket: "Since grandfather is so old that he can no longer work in the garden or even take care of himself, I plan to put him into the river. Then he will no longer be a burden on us." The little boy eyes the basket thoughtfully and then says, "Be sure and bring back the basket, father, I may need it someday for you." [37]

Through their literature, even young children can be made more conscious of the concept of aging with its attendant adjustments and problems. Through vicarious experiences children can come to the realization that aging is an extension of youth, and eventually "the twain shall meet".

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